

SPINOZA ON GOD AND THE LIFE LED BY REASON

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ABSTRACT

Despite differences in personal definitions of what it means to be good, one philosopher, Spinoza, adhered to the view that a life led by reason is truly virtuous. The purpose of this work is to investigate why Spinoza believed that to be so, and with the use of his classic the Ethics, I will explicate his understanding of God, or Nature, the mind, the body, and the influences that affect people's ways of living. Finally, by analyzing Spinoza's demonstrations concerning why a life guided by reason is identical to living morally, I will suggest that there is a general standard of righteousness conveyed in the Ethics that aims to benefit all, regardless of individual opinions concerning moral rectitude.

Keywords: *History of Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysics, Ontology, Rationalism, Spinozism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relation between living rationally and being a good person has pondered philosophers throughout the history of thought. One thinker, Spinoza, believed that reason could never lead one to do evil, and thus, one who is always rational is necessarily always good.¹ At the same time, Spinoza claims that each person naturally strives for what he/she believes is best for himself/herself.² One problem that arises from what appears to be a significant dent in Spinoza's argumentation is how is it possible that living by reason is good when people's view of goodness varies from one person to the next?

¹ B.D. Spinoza. E. Curley, ed., *Ethics* (Princeton: Penguin Books, 1996). 179-181.

² *Ibid.*, 76.



2. SPINOZA'S VIEW OF GOD, OR NATURE

As understood by Spinoza, the one substance is God or Nature.³ By God, or Nature, Spinoza is referring to that being who did not arise from another cause or concept other than himself/herself for his/her existence or conceivability.⁴ Moreover, Spinoza states that only things of the same kind are compatible, and thus, existence must have arisen from something akin to its nature.⁵ That is, just as a body cannot limit an idea ideationally, or that an idea can limit a body physically, one can understand existence as being unable to derive from non-existence; since they are not of the same nature.⁶ Consequently, since all life forms must have derived from a being who was compatible with their natures, it follows that the one substance, God, was the only entity who could have ultimately caused them.⁷ That is, though God is exempt from having to have derived from a cause other than himself/herself, it is still the case that, as a substance, he/she possesses Being, and thus he/she must bear, albeit limitedly, a likeness to all that he/she generates.⁸

Furthermore, Spinoza maintains that God, or Nature, as the only self-caused being, necessarily exists before all that he/she gave rise to, which leads Spinoza to claim that nothing can exist outside of him/her.⁹ In other words, because God or Nature is the only substance in the natural order, it follows that nothing can precede him/her since if something did that would indicate that he/she must have derived from a cause other than himself/herself.¹⁰ One reason why Spinoza would not ascribe to this view is due to his belief that two or more substances cannot exist.¹¹ That is, as a self-caused entity, a substance is unique from all that comes after it, and thus if there were two or more substances in the natural order, they would be incompatible since their unique natures would bar them from interacting.¹² Spinoza believes this to be so due to only things of the same nature being compatible, and since a substance exists uniquely, it follows that its distinctness renders it to be different from all other things.¹³ Consequently, the unique natures of two or more substances would make them incompatible and therefore unable to affect or cause one another's existence.¹⁴

³ Ibid., 9-10, 16-17.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶ Ibid., 1, 3.

⁷ Ibid., 4, 16.

⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Ibid., 3-4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.



Also, it is not the case that God or Nature is a substance that is a conglomeration of parts, but rather an infinite, eternal, immutable, and indivisible whole.¹⁵ One reason why Spinoza believes this to be so is that by being the only substance God is not subject to division.¹⁶ That is, since nothing precedes, or exists outside of God it follows that nothing can act upon him/her, and thus nothing can divide him/her.¹⁷ Furthermore, God must be infinite and eternal because nothing can ever limit him/her due to nothing being of the same exact nature as him/her.¹⁸ Consequently, because God exists unimpeded, one may claim that he/she is necessarily immutable since nothing has the power to change him/her.¹⁹

Furthermore, Spinoza states that because the natural order is abundant in life and animation, or activity, it must have derived from something akin to its constancy, which necessarily renders God to be an eternally active being.²⁰ That is, since the natural order is constantly active, it must have derived from an eternally active being since only things of the same nature can causally interact, and thus, as the only being that can limitlessly express himself/herself, God alone was that cause.²¹ Also, God's ceaselessness reinforces Spinoza's claim that he/she is immutable since nothing has the power to change him/her, due to nothing being completely of his/her nature.²² In other words, though God ultimately engendered all that exists, it is still the case that he/she is ontologically distinct in some ways since only he/she caused himself/herself to be.²³ Thus, by being free of having to exist according to the conditions set by a previous cause, one may claim that God is unchanging since nothing exists in such a way that can interrupt his/her fixity.²⁴

Moreover, Spinoza explains why he believes it to be the case that God is both the free cause of all things while at the same time adherent to his/her nature.²⁵ To him, God, who is an uninterrupted being necessary sets the condition for all that comes after him/her, and only in that sense is he/she free.²⁶ Consequently, since God is immutable and because that leaves aspects of his/her being to be permanent features of the natural order, it follows that one would be

¹⁵ Ibid., 4, 7, 9, & 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Ibid., 1.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.



accurate to describe him/her as he/she who innately follows his/her nature.²⁷ Hence, God is not under the compulsion of any other being beside himself/herself, rendering his/her nature to be the determinant force that led to the coming to be of all life.²⁸ From this, one would be correct to claim that Spinoza believes it to be the case that all other beings except for God feature negations, or it is the case that all forms of life beside him/her exist restrictedly.²⁹

That which gave rise to conditioned forms of life, Spinoza calls God's attributes, and they each eternally express just one aspect of his/her nature.³⁰ That is, for there to be life there must exist qualities of God that exude his/her nature, which one may understand as being the laws that ultimately set the conditions of existence for all that derived from him/her.³¹ Furthermore, since God is eternal, his/her attributes must be as well because only things of the same ontological type can interact.³² Moreover, because God is infinite, it follows that nothing can limit his/her attributes, and thus, they too are limitless.³³ Finally, attributes can only be in God's nature to possess since no other being except him/her has the power to handle them since as the only eternal and infinite substance, his/her nature alone matches theirs.³⁴

According to Spinoza, two permanent facets of Nature that exude from God are his/her attributes of thought and extension.³⁵ That is, since the natural order features ideational aspects and physical ones as well, it follows that as the only substance, God must be both immaterial and corporeal, or else those aspects of Nature would not exist.³⁶ Consequently, one may claim that if God were not a conceptual being, nothing would be conceivable, and if he/she were not physical, or extended, there would be no space for his/her modes to extend.³⁷ By modes, Spinoza is referring to those finite and determinate expressions of God, such as people, who consciously conceive and perceive, as well as concretely exist in the natural order. Lastly, Spinoza goes on to explain his views concerning the processes by which those modes came to be.

In Spinoza's view, God and his/her attributes ultimately gave rise to finite and determinate modes of existence.³⁸ One way in which this is possible is if one were to view God

²⁷ Ibid., 2, 14.

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

²⁹ Ibid., 2, 14.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.

³¹ Ibid,

³² Ibid., 6-7.

³³ Ibid., 7.

³⁴ Ibid., 16

³⁵ Ibid., 10-13, 33.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 1.



as being equivalent to the natural order and the permanent laws that guide it.³⁹ That is, God must be equivalent to Nature and its mechanics, since it is not the case that two or more substances can exist, and consequently, God as the only cause of himself/herself must be the only substance.⁴⁰ Furthermore, one may view God as being akin to the concept of a circle whereas Nature would be akin to a physical circle itself, hence making them coherent, or one and the same.⁴¹ That is because only one substance necessarily exist and since modes, such as people, experience reality through thought and extension, it follows that both those qualities must be attributes of God.⁴² Due to God necessarily possessing the infinite attributes of thought and extension it follows that he/she simultaneously expresses himself/herself as both an immaterial and corporeal substance.⁴³ Therefore, by concurrently being both conceptual and physical, God, as understood through his/her attribute of extension is Nature, and Nature, as understood through his/her attribute of thought is he/she.⁴⁴ Finally, by being the totality of the natural order, one may understand God and his/her attributes as the laws of nature that led to the manifestation of all forms of life.⁴⁵

To Spinoza, God, or Nature is the ultimate cause of all the modes that derive from him/her.⁴⁶ That is, though modes are finite and determinate, and God infinite and uncompelled, it is still the case that he/she gave way to all life since existence could not have arisen from non-existence.⁴⁷ Consequently, to explain how modes came to be while maintaining God's ontological distinctness, Spinoza claims that the immediate cause of modes are other modes, while the laws that allow them to interact derive from God.⁴⁸ Therefore, one may claim, that in the end, God is the cause of all life, but he/she causes existence through his/her attributes, which guide the flow of Nature, and all that can come to be in it.⁴⁹

Furthermore, Spinoza claims that because only things of the same nature can interact, it can only be the case that the direct cause of modes is other modes.⁵⁰ In other words, modes, such as people, can only engender other people's existence because it is not like them to be able to cause a life that is not of their kind.⁵¹ Moreover, when a mode causes another mode to come to

³⁹ Ibid., 3-4, 9-10, & 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 16, 25, & 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 114, 118-119.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3, 20.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵¹ Ibid.



be, it follows that that resulting mode necessarily inherits the conditions of being that its cause featured.⁵² That is, because all beings except God are determinate, or exist restrictedly, it follows that they pass on the limits of their natures to that which they cause.⁵³ Finally, Spinoza continues his *Ethics* by addressing the nature of the human mind and body.

3. SPINOZA'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MIND

According to Spinoza, the mind exists and relies on God's attribute of thought for its ability to conceive and perceive the ideational aspects of the natural order.⁵⁴ That is, the mind is a thinking thing, and by not possessing the attribute of thought, it is better to understand it as an apparatus that expresses aspects, or ideas of that attribute.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Spinoza states that the mind can have three types of ideas, those that are inadequate, adequate, and true.⁵⁶ To him, inadequate ideas are those ideas that are external to people and do not arise from them.⁵⁷ That is, ideas that are inadequate impress upon people's mind, instead of arising from them, and thus, people cannot understand those ideas as well as adequate ones.⁵⁸ By adequate ideas, Spinoza is referring to those ideas that arise from the mind, and by doing so, it follows that people can understand them much more than ideas that can act upon them.⁵⁹ Finally, by true ideas, Spinoza is referring to those ideas in which the concept of an object matches its physical reality.⁶⁰

Furthermore, to Spinoza, the mind can actively conceive and passively perceive ideas.⁶¹ That is, the mind has an active ability to form ideas, as well as a passive ability to take them in.⁶² To Spinoza, one may call those ideas that result from the mental act of conceiving as at least adequate, whereas those ideas that impress upon people's minds as always inadequate.⁶³ One reason why Spinoza believes this to be so is that adequate and true ideas can only arise from the active aspect of the mind since they rely on reason, while inadequate ideas are the result of perception.⁶⁴ In other words, adequate and true ideas are the result of thinking, which is an active ability, and thus, they must be easier for people to understand since they match the nature of their

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 10-11, 33.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31-32.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 32.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁴ Ibid.



minds to a greater degree than inadequate ones.⁶⁵ Consequently, one may claim inadequate ideas by acting upon the passive facet of the mind, are of a lesser epistemic value than adequate or true ones since they match the mind's nature to a lesser degree than them.⁶⁶

As understood by Spinoza, the mind can have three types of knowledge. The first of kind of knowledge that the mind can possess derives from inadequate ideas, which Spinoza claims causes mere opinions.⁶⁷ That is, opinions derive from ideas that are not inherent to the mind, and since they do not arise from people's powers to conceptualize, it follows that they are a superficial form of knowledge.⁶⁸ The second type of knowledge that the mind can have derives from at least adequate ideas, and Spinoza calls that rational knowledge.⁶⁹ That is, reason, or the concepts that derive from people's abilities to form ideas, is a type of knowledge, and Spinoza claims that it can assist people in recognizing what is true from what is false.⁷⁰ Furthermore, rational knowledge allows people to adequately understand the similarities between themselves and others which ultimately leads to general ideas concerning humanity.⁷¹ In other words, reason, or adequate knowledge, leads people to generalize about human nature, which is in their abilities due to them being part of humankind.⁷² The third kind of knowledge Spinoza calls intuitive knowledge, which derives from true ideas, and thus it is innate and matches the essences of the objects it concerns.⁷³ That is, intuitive knowledge by deriving from true ideas, is a kind of knowledge that is purely actual and the "objects" that it matches are essences or the immaterial aspects of those things that possess being.⁷⁴

Also, one may claim that the mind does not possess distinct faculties, rather it is a singular whole that has active and passive facets.⁷⁵ That is, people are incorrect to understand features of the mind such as imagination, memory, and the ability to will as being distinct mental qualities, and instead they should understand them as variations of the power of the mind.⁷⁶ One reason why Spinoza believes this to be so is that only a substance can possess attributes, and since the mind is only a mode of God, it cannot possess them.⁷⁷ Moreover, the mind's active essence, as

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55-57.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.



understood by Spinoza, is most compatible with the essence of God, who is eternally active, and thus that which derives from intuition, or pure reason, is most in tune with of his/her nature.⁷⁸

4. THE BODY AS UNDERSTOOD BY SPINOZA

To Spinoza, bodies exist through God's attribute of extension, and ultimately they depend on the continuity of the natural order for theirs.⁷⁹ That is, Spinoza claims that if God were to cease, then so would the physical aspects of the natural order, including bodies, since he/she, through the attribute of extension, is the only corporeal substance.⁸⁰ Moreover, God's attribute of extension led to the coming to be of bodies, since by being the physical laws of existence, that attribute not only necessarily set the conditions for them to arise, but also for them to have space to extend.⁸¹ Consequently, bodies, are modifications of Nature and one can understand them as physical expressions of God as understood through his/her attribute of extension.⁸² Lastly, Spinoza goes on to address how God or Nature does not change when bodies undergo change.

To Spinoza when a body undergoes change it is not the case that God changes.⁸³ One reason why he believes this to be so is that bodies are not infinite or eternal, but rather limited and finite, which necessarily stops them from being able to affect God, who is boundless and everlasting.⁸⁴ Also, because God is a single substance, it follows that he/she is indivisible since no parts compose him/her, and thus there are no parts that can result from him/her undergoing change.⁸⁵ That is, God is not an amalgamation of parts, but rather a singular being, and thus, he/she cannot be subject to division since there would be nothing for him/her to become.⁸⁶ Consequently, bodies, unlike God, are divisible since they have parts, and the change that they are subject to God is exempt from since he/she, as a corporeal substance, does not resemble them.⁸⁷ Hence, due to the ontological differences between God as a corporeal substance, and bodies as physical modes, it follows that what alters bodies cannot alter him/her.⁸⁸

Also, Spinoza states that the changes bodies are subject to involve variations in motion and position.⁸⁹ One may understand these changes as occurring when a body of a greater

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 10-11, 33.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

⁸¹ Ibid., 10-11, 32-33.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1, 3, & 41.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1, 3, 9, & 41.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1, 3, 9, 25-31, & 41.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 41-42.



magnitude collides with a less formidable body, which, in turn, causes that weaker body to change position and move.⁹⁰ In other words, when two bodies interact the one that is stronger overpowers the weaker, hence determining the speed and change of position of that weaker body.⁹¹ Spinoza believes this to be so not only because bodies are of the same category of existence, or derive from the same attribute of God, but also because they are naturally at rest or in motion.⁹² Therefore, one may claim that when a body is not at rest, it is necessarily moving which can only happen if another body disturbs it.⁹³ Finally, a body that is moving can only come to rest if another body of a greater might stops it, and thus, it follows that change in motion and position are ultimately a result of bodies being able to override or succumb to one another.⁹⁴

Furthermore, Spinoza states that bodies exist indefinitely, or it is not the case that people can know the time of their demise since only inadequate ideas of their deaths exist in God.⁹⁵ One reason why Spinoza believes this is that the body cannot conceive or take in ideas because it exists by way of a different attribute of God than the mind.⁹⁶ Furthermore, even if bodies did possess knowledge of their deaths, they could never communicate that knowledge to their minds due to them not being of the same nature.⁹⁷ Moreover, though people can project ideas of their demises onto God, it follows that they are forever inadequate since the cause of one's death derives from something external to that person.⁹⁸ That is because Spinoza believes the body can only strive to exist, and thus, what ultimately causes its death, is, or derives from, something outside it.⁹⁹ Consequently, since what causes one's death is external to that individual, it follows that that person can only have inadequate ideas of his/her demise since those ideas cannot be innate.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, though the mind and body exist through different attributes of God, and are thus incompatible, it is still the case that Spinoza believes they form a union.¹⁰¹ By union, Spinoza understands the mind to be coherent with the body, or it is the case that when the mind thinks the body acts in a way that agrees with its ideas, and when the body acts, the mind thinks

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 39-40.



in a way that agrees with its actions.¹⁰² Also, the mind and body operate in a such a way that whatever affects the mind there is necessarily a matching effect in the body, and whatever affects the body there is necessarily a matching mental effect.¹⁰³ Furthermore, Spinoza states that because the body and mind ultimately derive from God, who is simultaneously corporeal and immaterial, it is the case that if the mind existed through the attribute of extension, it would be the body, and if the body existed through the attribute of thought it would be the mind.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, one may claim that because the mind and body concur and since they are ultimately interchangeable, it follows that the order and connection of ideas are the same as the order and connection of things.¹⁰⁵

To Spinoza, the order and connection of ideas are the same as the order and connection of things.¹⁰⁶ In other words, it is the case that the flow of ideas matches the physical acts of the body, and the series of actions that the body performs matches the flow of ideas.¹⁰⁷ One reason why Spinoza ascribes to this view is that God as understood as the laws of thought and existence, necessarily concurs with himself/herself as Nature.¹⁰⁸ That is, God, as a being who is seamlessly immaterial and physical which is evident in how the natural order's coherency presents itself to his/her modes, ultimately gave rise to the laws that guide thinking and bodily actions.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, since God exudes his/her attributes, or laws of nature which gave rise to all forms of life, it follows that they reflect him/her insofar as they can as modes.¹¹⁰ Thus, since God is concurrent with himself/herself as an immaterial and corporeal substance, and because he/she radiates his/her nature which set the parameters for life to arise, it follows that his/her modes resemble him/her only insofar as they think and act in agreement.¹¹¹ Finally, because the ideas of the mind match the actions of the body, and vice-versa, it is the case that what can affect the mind arouses a sensation of equal power in the body, and what can affect the body incites an idea of equal strength mentally.¹¹²

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 114, 118-119.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 35, 114, 118-119.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.



5. SPINOZA ON THE INFLUENCES THAT AFFECT PEOPLE'S WAYS OF LIVING

Spinoza's *Ethics* continues with an analysis of those ideas that can act upon and influence the ways in which people conduct themselves. These inadequate, or external ideas that exist in the natural order, Spinoza calls affects, and he claims that God and people are their partial cause.¹¹³ By partial cause, Spinoza understands that which people cannot understand as arising either from themselves or God completely.¹¹⁴ That is, God is the partial cause of affects only because they necessarily exist in him/her, and people the other, since affects, as ideas, are compatible with their minds.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, though affects can act upon people, and ultimately influence how they think, and consequently act, they cannot act upon God. Spinoza believes this to be the case since nothing can exist outside of the natural order, and since God is equivalent to Nature, nothing can exist outside of him/her.¹¹⁶ Finally, Spinoza goes on to describe how affects act upon the mind and thus, translate to bodily effects.

To Spinoza, affects are ideational and can act upon the mind since they are of the same immaterial nature.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, affects can be detrimental since people inadequately understand them since they are external ideas that did not come to be because of people entirely.¹¹⁸ That is, people cannot understand affects as clearly and distinctly as the ideas that they form since affects do not fully arise from their natures because they are not innate to them.¹¹⁹ Also, affects have the power to either positively or detrimentally affect the mind.¹²⁰ To Spinoza, those affects that aid or promote the ability of the mind to form ideas on its own or to think at least rationally, are good.¹²¹ In other words, there exist affects that can help people to think in clearer ways, or understand their innate ideas more precisely, and hence, they are beneficial.¹²² On the other hand, there exist affects that distort the mind or cause it to think more confusedly.¹²³ Consequently, those affects that restrain the mind's power to form ideas on its own, insofar as it can as a mode of God's attribute of thought, Spinoza calls evil.¹²⁴ Hence, one

¹¹³ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 69-70.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 10-11, 70.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 57-58, 120-121.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.



may claim that the mind is effectible, and from this, it has the power to slip into lesser degrees of perfection, or reality, as well as the power to pass into greater ones.¹²⁵

Furthermore, because the life of the mind parallels the life of the body, it is the case that what affects the mind has a concurrent effect on the body. One may claim that to Spinoza, when an affect positively effects the mind, it necessarily has conducive effects on the well-being of the body.¹²⁶ Contrastingly, when an affect negatively effects the mind, it necessarily has detrimental effects on the body's well-being.¹²⁷ Therefore, one may claim that those affects that are good for the mind are also useful for the maintenance of the body's health, and those affects that are dangerous to the mind are also useless or damaging to the body.¹²⁸ Moreover, since the life of the body matches the life of the mind, it follows that what is conducive to its survival necessarily affects the mind in positive ways, while those affects that are evil, or useless to the body affects the mind similarly.¹²⁹ Hence, it is the case that the body is effectible, and thus, it, like the mind, is subject to influences that can either help it to act at its best or obstruct it from doing so.¹³⁰ Lastly, Spinoza goes on to describe the nature of joy, sadness, and desire, or the general affects that can act upon people.

To Spinoza happiness, or joy is an affect that benefits the mind by aiding it to think at its best.¹³¹ That is, joy helps people to pass into greater states of perfection or awareness, and thus it induces rational thinking.¹³² One reason why Spinoza believes this to be so is that when the body undergoes a change that is beneficial to it, or conducive to its health, it must have a matching effect on the mind.¹³³ Consequently, an ampler body translates into an ampler, or more aware mind, and thus, by paralleling one another, one may claim that the mind is necessarily abler to reason when it feels joy.¹³⁴ Another reason why joy heightens people's abilities to conceptualize is that though it externally affects them, it is the case that it necessarily involves more adequacy than other affects.¹³⁵ Joy must involve more adequacy than other affects, since by heightening people's abilities to think, it necessarily reflects the actuality of the active facet of their minds, thus making it easier for them to understand its effects rationally.¹³⁶ Finally, a heightened state of

¹²⁵ Ibid., 70-71.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 102-103.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 102-103, 120-121.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 101-103.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.



awareness, as understood by Spinoza, translates to better knowledge of the ideational aspects of reality, and how to ultimately regulate the effects of those aspects, which, in turn, benefits the body.¹³⁷

Contrastingly, Spinoza calls sadness that affect which is a deterrent to the mind and by restraining it from thinking, it causes it to sink into a less ample state of perfection or awareness.¹³⁸ Consequently, one may regard sadness as amongst the most inadequately understood affects, since it only deters one from thinking in a rational way.¹³⁹ In other words, sadness, by definition, is detrimental, and as understood by Spinoza, it affects the mind by distorting its understanding of reality, and thus, it can only derive from inadequate, or external ideas.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, since sadness is obstructive to the mind's understanding of the natural order, it follows that it affects the body in a similarly deleterious way.¹⁴¹ That is, since the mind and body ultimately follow the same path, though through different attributes of God, whatever hurts the mind's power to think, necessarily restricts the body's power to act.¹⁴² Moreover, sorrow ultimately derives from ignorance, and thus it is far from being rational knowledge, leading Spinoza to claim that it is ultimately illusory.¹⁴³ That is, the real cause of sorrow is people's lack of understanding of what has led them to feel saddened, rendering that affect to be incompatible with their innate capacities to reason.¹⁴⁴ Lastly, Spinoza continues his examination of the affects by addressing the nature of desire.

By desire, Spinoza means that affect which can aid people in their natural strivings to be.¹⁴⁵ That is, when people properly regulate desire, it matches their innate abilities to live, since, as modes of God, they cannot help but to attempt to be eternal.¹⁴⁶ According to Spinoza, this aspect of human nature derives from his belief that the mind's essence, by being active necessarily attempts to imitate the eternalness of God, who is at the apex of reality and existence.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, since the mind strives to be eternal, it follows that the body must follow suit, since it has no other choice but behave in a way that matches the mind.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, though the body is not eternal or understood to be so, it is still the case that people try to reflect

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 102-103.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 104.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.



the infinitude of Nature by innately striving to live.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Spinoza claims that desire can act upon people's minds and bodies, and when harnessed by rational thinking it is a tool that benefits their natural striving to be.¹⁵⁰ In other words, reason helps to extinguish people's detrimental desires, and when they learn how to only follow desires that are conducive to their well-being, desire can only act upon them in useful ways.¹⁵¹

Despite reason's ability to tame, or assuage the power of desire, it is still the case that certain desires are utterly useless.¹⁵² That is, there exist desires that do not assist people in living rationally, or healthily, and thus, Spinoza claims that they are useless since they cannot lead to anything good.¹⁵³ Moreover, desires that lead people to anguish or pain neither arise from people's ability to reason nor matches the innate activeness of their minds, and thus, individuals do not adequately understand them.¹⁵⁴ In other words, desires that cause the mind to think restrictedly, people cannot adequately know, due to those desires acting upon them externally, and thus they are passive perceptions and not the products of mental activity.¹⁵⁵ Finally, Spinoza goes on to address why people desire what they believe is best for themselves and not what is genuinely best for all.

One reason why Spinoza believes that people strive for what they think is best for themselves, and not for what is best for anyone is primarily due to their desires being somewhat unique to them.¹⁵⁶ That is, as modes, or particular affections of God, people's natures are specific, or it is the case that they can be more of an expression of thought than extension, or more of an expression of extension than thought.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, Spinoza claims that people can also vary in degrees of how much they express God's attributes of thought and extension, and thus, the same form of desire can affect one person in one way and another in another way.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, Spinoza claims that since the mind and body are subject to the effects of many affects, it is the case that desire can sway people in many ways, and thus, it is not uncommon for two or more people to regard the same type of desire as acting upon them differently.¹⁵⁹ That is, people's minds and bodies are subject to many external desires, and since people are distinct from one

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.



another, only insofar as they can be as modes, it is the case that those desires vary in how powerfully they influence them.¹⁶⁰

Though what is desirable is relative, Spinoza maintains that people share in the fact that they strive for what they deem to be good.¹⁶¹ That is, though what is good varies from one person to the next, it is still the case that people do not knowingly chase what they understand to be detrimental.¹⁶² One reason why Spinoza believes this to be so is due to people's natural strivings to be, which is an activity that necessarily invites mental activity or rational conceptualizing.¹⁶³ From this, people can know what is good for them by realizing what is good is purely actual, or totally natural, and since reason is also actual, it follows that what is commonly good for all matches the nature of reason.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, one may claim that people, through reason, can come to know what is truly good, since it is an activity that comes to reflect the continualness of God or Nature.¹⁶⁵

6. THE LIFE LED BY REASON

To Spinoza, a life led by reason begins when an individual attempts to overpower those affects that can cause him/her to slip into a lesser state of awareness, or act in a way that is detrimental to his/her health.¹⁶⁶ To outdo negative affects, Spinoza suggests that people can use ideas that are of an opposite and greater nature.¹⁶⁷ That is, people may use happiness, which is a positive affect, to overcome sadness, which is a negative affect, since happiness is both opposite and more adequately understood, or of a greater nature than sorrow.¹⁶⁸ From this, one would be right to claim that in Spinoza's view, ideas that match or closely match the innate essence of the mind are more adequately or truly understood by people, and thus, it is those ideas that are best to combat the inadequacy or falsity of damaging affects.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, that which arouses adequate or true ideas can ward off inadequate or false affects, since they are good, or useful, and thus, they preserve the well-being of the mind and body.¹⁷⁰ That is since the mind and body are in sync, it follows that adequate and true ideas, by steering people away from evil, or the effects of detrimental affects, necessarily causes the body to strive more powerfully in its being.¹⁷¹ Finally,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 85, 120-121.

¹⁶² Ibid., 85, 118-119.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 57, 85, & 118-119.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 57, 85, & 118-121.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 120-121.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 125-126.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 118-121.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 116-117.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 127-128.



from this greater striving, one finds that acting in a rational way is not only synonymous with thinking rationally, but it is also the same as living by the laws of the natural order, or ethically.¹⁷²

As understood by Spinoza, one who lives and acts by the laws of God, or Nature, must be thinking rationally.¹⁷³ That is, those who constantly act in a way that is promotive of their physical well-being, are following the laws of Nature since they are mimicking its ceaseless activity.¹⁷⁴ Consequently, since Nature is eternally active, and because the body strives to be like Nature, there must be a mental striving that parallels that desire to be, and thus those who act in healthy ways must also think in more rational, or active ways.¹⁷⁵ Lastly, those who strive to think in only rational ways are thinking by the laws of God, and thus, one may understand them as having ardor or love for him/her.¹⁷⁶

Those who act and think according to reason are following the laws of the natural order, and thus, one may claim that they love God or Nature.¹⁷⁷ By love, Spinoza is referring to that affect which is a type of joy that people have for others who arouse feelings of happiness within them.¹⁷⁸ Consequently, since happiness raises one's state of awareness, it follows that when an individual has a love for another, that person's mind is more formidable, and thus, so is his/her body.¹⁷⁹ With an ampler, or more active body, one is more in line with the power of Nature, and since Nature, through the attribute of thought, is God, one may claim that those who act by reason are expressing love for him/her.¹⁸⁰ From this, it follows that those who love God, are caring for the well-being of their mind and body, and since he/she exudes the laws that gave rise to them as modes, it follows that loving one's self is a form of loving him/her.¹⁸¹ Therefore, one would be correct to claim that Spinoza would view those who care for their bodies as having a love for Nature, and those who care for their minds as having a love for God.¹⁸² But, one must note that since God and Nature are ultimately one and the same, it follows that both types of devotion to the self ultimately leads to loving the same substance.¹⁸³ Finally, Spinoza goes on to describe how it is that living by reason equates to moral purity.

¹⁷² Ibid., 128-129.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 129.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 126, 129.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 129, 169, & 173.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 105-106, 129, 169, & 173.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 105-106, 107-109, 129, 169, & 173.

¹⁸² Ibid., 129, 166-167, & 169.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 1-3, 166-167, & 169.



To Spinoza, since people are of God, and depend on him/her for their existence and conceivability, it follows that moral purity, or virtuousness, or blessedness is in their capabilities to achieve insofar as they can as modes.¹⁸⁴ That is, people, though limited, determinate, and finite, nevertheless strive to match God's perfection, since, as modes, they are innately of him/her.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, Spinoza equates this natural tendency, or desire, for perfection, as being the product of reason and true ideas.¹⁸⁶ One reason why Spinoza ascribes to this view is that reason, and true ideas lead people to desire in purified ways since those ideas match the essence or active nature of desire.¹⁸⁷ From this, one may claim that pure, or rational desire is a drive that is useful for living in ways that are conducive to one's mental and physical well-being.¹⁸⁸ That is, when one rationally cares for themselves, it is the case that they are moral since their mental desire to live matches their physical actions to persevere.¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, since being ethical toward the body must affect the mind to think in a similar way, it follows that those who care for themselves physically, are caring for their minds, and thus, they are virtuous.¹⁹⁰ In other words, when people care for themselves because they acknowledge that they are extensions, or expressions of God, of Nature, it follows that they are caring for the natural order too, since they are a part of that order, and thus, they are being ethical.¹⁹¹

Also, it is the case that living by reason equates to virtuousness or blessedness.¹⁹² By these concepts, one may understand someone who is virtuous as being a virtuoso of the self and one who harbors blessedness as following the flow of life because of the wisdom that derives from that virtuosity.¹⁹³ Consequently, Spinoza would claim that despite people's personal desires for what they deem to be good, it is still the case that the wise, by knowing that desires that lead to mental or physical inactivity are useless, or evil, do not act in ways that defy the nature of their active ideas.¹⁹⁴ In other words, those who master themselves are partaking in an activity that matches the essence of their minds, and the nature of their bodies, and by not acting in ways that are detrimental to either, it follows that they are wise.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, those who do not succumb to inactivity in mind or body possess blessedness, and to do so they must be virtuous, or adherent to

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 180-181.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 57, 163-164, 173-174, & 180-181.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 179-181.



their active, or rational ideas.¹⁹⁶ Finally, one may claim that to Spinoza, virtuousness, by leading to wisdom and resulting in blessedness, is the highest understanding of one's place in the natural order, all due to that individual's dedication to rational, or moral living.¹⁹⁷

7. CONCLUSION

The intent of this piece was to explicate Spinoza's views of God, the mind, the body, and the influences that can aid or deter one from living rationally so that the reader would better understand his arguments regarding what constitutes a genuinely moral lifestyle. Next, by arguing that what is useful to the body's health, or conducive to the mind's ability to conceptualize, is true goodness, I have hoped to justify how one can view Spinoza as being consistent when he claims that each person strives to be good, despite goodness being different for each person. Finally, I hope that this piece helps to open new dialogue concerning the meaning of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and how its lessons can benefit all who study it.

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¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.